

Mystical, Medicinal Witch Hazel

Sheila Connor

Fall is our native witch hazel's best time. In this season it will reward the passerby with a faint, clean scent reminiscent of spring and the sight of ribbons of gold among equally golden leaves. But because it has long been used as a natural astringent, *Hamamelis virginiana* may be more familiar to most people as a bottle of liquid on a shelf in the medicine cabinet than as an understory species of the New England woodland.

As an all-purpose home remedy, witch hazel extract has outlived many of the patent medicines of our great-grandparents' day. Commercial manufacture of witch hazel extract began in 1866, when Thomas Newton Dickinson, a minister and entrepreneur, built a witch hazel distillery in Essex, Connecticut. Originally, witch hazel brush was cut locally and then transported either by boat or by horse and wagon to the distillery. The company has always obtained the witch hazel it needs from the forests of southern New England, and most of the harvest now comes from the northwestern corner of Connecticut. And today, as in the past, the brushcutters—farmers and woodcutters working their own land or land they have contracted to clear—sell directly to the distiller. Work begins in October and often continues until late spring. Sometimes only the branches are cut; otherwise, the plant is cut to the ground. But because witch hazel quickly sprouts from stumps, only a few years will pass before a plant may be harvested again. The invention of the portable chipper allowed the refining process to begin right on site, and now the brush arrives at the factory ready to be distilled in stainless-steel vats, where steam is applied for more than thirty-six hours to the chopped brush. The vaporized essence, which comes from the cambium layer just under the outer bark, is "scrubbed" in washing chambers, reheated to vapor, condensed, and filtered. Today's modern equipment and techniques still deal with three

basic elements—witch hazel brush, water, and heat—and T. N. Dickinson's "formula." The clear liquid you see in a bottle of hamamelis extract is 86 percent "double distilled" witch hazel and 14 percent alcohol.

Witch hazel's applications seem to have changed as little as its manufacturing process. The explorer-botanist Peter Kalm reported the use of *Hamamelis virginiana* by Native Americans in treating eye diseases as early as 1751. They called the plant "magic water," boiled the stems and used the liquid not only for their eyes but also to treat cuts, bruises, and scratches. The many modern-day applications of aqueous witch hazel approved by the Food and Drug Administration include treating sores, minor lacerations, sprains, and tired and puffy eyes.

There is also a mystical side to *Hamamelis virginiana*: its use in the occult arts. The common name witch hazel was given to *H. virginiana* by early English settlers because they believed it possessed the ability to "divine." Our native tree was not the first plant to be called witch hazel; the colonists brought the name with them across the Atlantic. Its application is an example of how often a common name reflects an association people make with a plant, rather than an accurate description of it.

In Great Britain, dowsers used their native elm, *Ulmus glabra*, which they called the "witch hazel tree," to find hidden veins of precious metal or underground springs. In



The enduring commercial success of witch hazel may lie in imaginative marketing. Early advertising of the E. E. Dickinson Witch Hazel Company took advantage of romantic legends, as in this label for a bottle of Witchal, a stronger mix of witch hazel and alcohol: "In the early days it was believed that when the good witches boiled the witch hazel twigs in their caldrons it was a sign that the potion was ready for use when the phantomlike shape of a beautiful young woman could be seen riding through the steam." Apparently the batch in this illustration isn't quite ready.

Old English, *wice* meant "lively" or "to bend," and as a dowser approached the site of, say, a potentially productive spring, the branch would become "lively" and begin to point to the source.

The pliant branches of the elm were also used by archers to make their bows. When it was reported that the "aborigines" made the same use of *Hamamelis virginiana* for their weapons, it seems that the colonists transferred all the elm's associated powers to the New World plant. Although many plants were used for dowsing, witch hazel became the preferred one for use as a divining rod.

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This seasonal guide to medicinal herbs discusses witch hazel and blackberry medicinal uses. Both plants have astringent properties. I have always used witch hazel as a simple astringent for cuts and scratches. I also offer it to teenagers (and others) who have mild acne. To cleanse, all you have to do is apply a bit of witch hazel wash on a cotton ball and sweep it around your face. It should leave a pleasant tingling sensation. Witch hazel is a small tree or shrub, which favors damp woods and may be found along some roadsides that border forest areas. It is unique because its yellow blossoms appear during the fall—just as the leaves are being shed. It can frequently be found with its bare branches decorated by spidery yellow blossoms. Witch hazel is widely known for easing inflammation and soothing sensitive skin, but this powerful remedy has more to offer. Here are the top 8 benefits and uses of witch hazel. There are many species of witch hazel, but *Hamamelis virginiana*—a type of shrub native to North America—is most commonly used in folk medicine in the US. The leaves and bark are made into teas and ointments. Most often applied to the skin and scalp, witch hazel is widely known for its ability to ease inflammation and soothe sensitive skin. It can also be added to herbal teas and ingested orally in small amounts as a natural treatment for other conditions. Here are the top 8 benefits and uses of witch hazel.

1. Relieves Inflammation. Witch hazel. Doesn't it sound like some magical plant that grows in a far-off land and makes anyone who eats it immortal? Or better yet, it sounds like something you're sure to find in Snape's potions dungeons in Hogwarts. But alas, it is but a plant that belongs in our mortal world. However, the many benefits that witch hazel provides are nothing short of amazing. After all, it is known as nature's best astringent. The extract of witch hazel plant is used as a natural astringent and skin care remedy for a range of problems because it contains polyphenols and tannins that exhibit antioxidant and astringent activity, respectively. Since witch hazel has been around and used for so long, it is but obvious that it has worked marvelously as a skin care agent. Witch-hazel rejuvenates, soothes, tones and restores the skin, reduces its oiliness. It is used for varicose veins due to the ability to restore venous circulation. It is used for phlebitis, hemorrhoids, open ulcers, neurodermatitis and edema. Contraindications for Witch-hazel: individual intolerance, allergic reaction, pregnancy, breastfeeding, infringement of the hemorrhoid, pronounced prolapse of hemorrhoids, prolapse of the rectal mucosa, hemorrhoidal bleeding. Side effects of Witch-hazel: can cause an allergic reaction. USES: Witch hazel has been used to relieve swelling, bleeding, itching, minor pain, and discomfort caused by minor skin irritations (e.g., cuts, scrapes, insect bites). It is also used to relieve itching, discomfort, irritation, and burning caused by hemorrhoids. Some herbal/diet supplement products have been found to contain possibly harmful impurities/additives. PRECAUTIONS: Before using witch hazel, tell your doctor or pharmacist if you are allergic to it; or if you have any other allergies. This product may contain inactive ingredients, which can cause allergic reactions or other problems. Talk to your pharmacist for more details. During pregnancy, this product should be used only when clearly needed.